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ABSTRACT

In 1996, New York's Monroe Community College (MCC) participated in the American Association of Community Colleges' Exploring America's Communities project, which worked to strengthen the teaching and learning of American history, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges. MCC's primary goals are as follows: permanently establishing its class entitled "Common Ground in the Rochester/Genesee Region"; motivating other faculty to teach the course or to develop other courses like it; and revising existing courses so that they include a "common ground" component. The first class, held in the fall, featured four speakers and was small enough to allow for much conversation between the speakers and the students. Obstacles for the program included a lack of publicity due to the short time frame; a lack of a "track record," which caused students to overlook the course; and a delay in adding faculty names to the master schedule. The following three elements remained to be done at the time of the progress report: (1) further marketing the course to students; (2) increasing faculty interest in teaching the course; and (3) moving the course from the Humanities division to Social Science in fall 1997. Student responses to an anonymous survey regarding American identity are included. (HAA)

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Monroe Community College
Exploring America's Communities Progress Report

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In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book
(New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997)

JC 970 113

MONROE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

EXPLORING AMERICA'S COMMUNITIES: IN QUEST OF COMMON GROUND

PROGRESS REPORT

Monroe Community College was founded in 1961 as part of a statewide system of two year institutions designed to provide technical, paraprofessional and university-parallel education. It opened in 1962 with 720 students and a fulltime faculty of 36. Today, M.C.C. is one of thirty community colleges within the State University of New York (SUNY), and serves 14,000 matriculated and non-matriculated students. SUNY community colleges are financed by New York State, student tuition, and a local government sponsor. M.C.C.'s local sponsor is the Monroe County Legislature.

The College's first campus was located in downtown Rochester, at 410 Alexander Street, in the former East High School. In June, 1968, the College moved to a new, modern campus at 1000 East Henrietta Road. This move placed the College on a 314 acre suburban site in the town of Brighton, just three and one half miles from downtown Rochester. In January, 1992, M.C.C. opened the Damon City Campus, in the heart of downtown Rochester. This second campus has proven to be very successful. Rochester is the third largest city in New York State and is the county seat of Monroe County. The city is situated on the Genesee River near its outlet to Lake Ontario, in the midst of the fruit and truck garden country of the picturesque Genesee Valley. It leads the world in the production of cameras and photographic supplies, optical instruments, recording devices, and related products. It ranks high in the manufacture of men's clothing, communications equipment, photocopy, and medical, surgical, automotive, and office equipment. Representatives of many local industries serve the College in an advisory capacity in order to coordinate the

College's program offerings with the employment needs of the community.

An important educational and cultural center, the Rochester area includes the University of Rochester, with its world-renowned Eastman School of Music, and Strong Memorial Hospital; Rochester Institute of Technology, and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf; Colgate-Rochester Divinity School-Bexley Hall-Crozer Theological Seminary; St. John Fisher College; Nazareth College; and Roberts Wesleyan College. The State University Colleges at Brockport and Geneseo are within commuting distance. The city is the home of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra; the nationally known Lilac Festival; the Strasenburgh Planetarium which is part of the Rochester Museum and Science Center; and the George Eastman House of Photography, a world center of collections and exhibits featuring the history and use of photography.

Rochester and the surrounding towns have a very diverse population, attracting people in engineering and the technologies, in medical-surgical and related healthcare, in music, photography, and the other arts. It also has a unique history that has inspired the development of the course we call "Common Ground in the Rochester/Genesee Region." One primary goal is to establish this course as a permanent offering within the Social Science Department. A second goal is to interest other faculty in teaching this course, or in developing other courses that explore "common ground", or in revising existing courses so that they include a "common ground" component.

During the fall semester the class heard four speakers: the Rochester Historian, Ruth Napersteck; the president of the New York State Canal Society, and Professor of Geology at Monroe Community

College, Thomas X. Grasso; a local historical fiction writer, Miriam Monfredo; and a newspaper reporter, and adjunct professor at Monroe Community College, Douglas Mandalero. This first class was small enough to allow for a seminar atmosphere and much "conversation" between speakers as they presented their material, as well as "conversation" student to student, and student to faculty. Students became aware of their own family histories, and were encouraged to explore the journeys that resulted in their settling in the Rochester/Genesee Valley region.

We encountered some obstacles as we prepared for this course. First, we were working in a short time frame, which meant limited publicity opportunities. Without a "track record" for a course, students have a tendency to overlook an offering. We found it difficult to identify it on the master schedule in an effective marketing manner. We also did not include the three faculty names on the master schedule as quickly as we should have. Flyers helped to publicize the course, and counselors involved in registration, along with the three faculty involved in the project who also worked in registration, improved our numbers.

Things left to be done are as follows:

First, we must keep the course in the public eye. To this end, our new flyers have been printed and are posted around the buildings. Project faculty and others are encouraging students to take the course.

Second, we must interest more faculty in teaching the course, or in developing another "common ground" course. Some disciplines that seem to be likely prospects are sociology, geology, music, art, and theatre. We plan to pursue discussions with faculty in these areas.

Third, the transition from HMN (Humanities) to SOS (Social Science) in Fall, 1997 is in the process and will be accomplished in a timely fashion.

Student responses to the following four questions were gathered through an anonymous survey conducted during the last week of classes. They are as follows:

What does it mean to be an American?

Most of the students listed a love for freedom and liberty as very important, having discovered that some people, even in their own families, left wealth somewhere else to come to America. Many of the students spoke of a desire for togetherness, and recognized the strength we have **because** of our diversity, and the resulting exposure to different points of view. Many admired the hardiness of the early settlers and noted that hardiness continues to be an important factor within the American psyche.

What divides us?

Different religious beliefs and racial intolerance topped the list of divisive elements within our country. Various cultural/ethnic traditions, and socio-economic conditions (especially wealthy as well as poor "ghetto" living) ranked second and third. Political policies, moral attitudes, and hatred were also divisive elements listed.

What brings us together? / Common Ground?

The desire for liberty and freedom to make our own ways within societal bounds, was rated highest. Pride in our country, our neighborhoods, and in ourselves is something we share. This pride is resurfacing even in the poorer communities in the nation. The often elusive "pursuit of happiness" was sometimes

linked with materialism, but the sense that young Americans are beginning to reevaluate the desire for "things" seems to be emerging. The value of having less material wealth and more in the way of quality family time is becoming a serious consideration for many of our students. Other items of "common ground" listed were respect for traditional morals & values, understanding of people's differences, and honesty.

The faculty team working on this course were extremely pleased with the amount of information we covered and the methodology employed. The atmosphere in the classroom was stimulating. In fact, many of the students said that they looked forward to coming to this class. The final project was a great success. It was either a small group effort or an individual one in which the students could do a poster display, or an illustrated report, or a video/audio presentation relative to the Genesee Valley region, or their own ethnic roots in the region, or business/famous figures in the region. The project was presented at an evening seminar attended by the students, along with families and friends. Immediately after the seminar we enjoyed a pot-luck banquet of ethnic foods donated by the students and faculty.